

ORAL TRADITION VERSUS LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE: THE BABUR-BURA CASE REVISITED

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Introduction

In a previous study (BADEJO 1989) which originally tackled the apparent contradiction between oral tradition and linguistic evidence in the Babur-Bura case, we approached the issue through a contrastive analysis of Bura (based on BADEJO, 1987) and Kanuri (based on CYFFER, 1971 and 1974; Hutchison, 1981). Since the origin-story tends to push the Babur towards the Kanuri, leaving the Bura to stand all alone, it was felt that any linguistic closeness between Kanuri and Babur would confirm the origin-story. Unfortunately, the paper did not come up with such evidence.

The paper in question summarizes COHEN's (1983) account and interpretation of both the Babur and the Bura versions of their origin. It then presents the loopholes in the various accounts, based not only on the current linguistic classification of the area, but also on the results of an investigation carried out within the framework of the "Borno Surname Project".

At both the phonological and syntactic levels, BADEJO (1989) observes that in view of certain fundamental differences between Kanuri on the one hand and Babur-Bura on the other, Babur affiliation with Kanuri is doubtful. Such differences include: the lack of voice distinction between the labio-dental fricatives in Kanuri (i.e. /f/ and /v/; the /p/ - /f/ alternation), especially in word-initial position in Kanuri, and finally, the SOV structure of the Kanuri sentence. The paper, drawing on support from an opinion survey, therefore concludes that "general linguistic and the social linguistic considerations presented ... seem to point to the fact that the Babur and the Bura are, by and large, the same people". The paper, however, recognizes the need for a Babur-Bura contrastive study. The current paper is the first step in that direction.

The present study

In order to respond to the challenge of contrasting Babur and Bura, we set out to use two instruments: informal interview and the questionnaire method.

Research questions

The following questions were drawn up in order to guide the research:

- i) Is there a significantly close relationship between Bura and Babur?
- ii) Are the Babur significantly more aware of the origin-story than the Bura?
- iii) Is there a significantly high correlation between the beliefs of the Bura and Babur with regard to the origin story?

Research procedure and methodology

Two research assistants, both identifying themselves as Bura and Babur respectively, were recruited to randomly administer a questionnaire which was specifically designed to draw out the respondent's feelings towards the origin-story. It should be noted that the sample selection was controlled for lineage, sex, age, and religion, among others. Inter-group and intra-group comparisons were made. The results are as discussed below.

Results and discussion

Two groups of respondents: the Bura Group (BRG) and the Babur Group (BBG) emerged from a research sample which was pegged at 200 (i.e. 100 Bura and 100 Babur).

In order to respond to our research question (i), we shall rely on items in the questionnaire that are relevant. The BBG had a score of 100% in responding to the item which sought to find out if Bura and Babur had a close relationship. A further investigation, using their reaction to the statement: "The difference between Bura and Babur speech-forms is minor", was also done. Some respondents even went further to freely comment that except for slight phonetic differences, the Babur and the Bura speech-forms are essentially the same. Some of the respondents also reflected the popularly-held belief that the Bura are mostly Christians, while the Babur are mostly Moslems. This claim is indeed upheld by the distribution pattern of our respondents: 99% of the BBG is Moslem - the only Christian is indeed the product of a mixed marriage (cf. the BRG which is 84% Christian and 6% Moslem).

The BRG also recognized the closeness of the relationship between Bura and Babur. Some of them pointed out the fact that the Babur are a minority, although they belong to the ruling class. However, the BRG responded negatively to more of the sub-items of item 14 (of the questionnaire) which sought to know what aspects of the origin story they believed or otherwise. 72% of the BRG did not believe "the encounter between Yampta and the Bura". The BRG also claimed that whereas many Babur could speak and understand Bura, the reverse is not the case with the Bura-speaking Babur.

In view of the examples cited in Appendix C and considering the results of our survey, research question (i) may be answered in the affirmative.

Our response to research question (ii) is based on the outcome of our respondents' personal assessment of their familiarity with the Babur-Bura origin-story. (80% of the BBG claim a good knowledge of the story - the remaining 20% claim satisfactory knowledge). Figures for the BRG are also along the same lines. It should be noted, however, that a sub-division of the respondents (e.g. in terms of age) reveals that the older the respondent, the more likely it is that he would have a better understanding of the origin-story. This could also be an indication of parents' unwillingness to propagate the origin-story. In short, there does not seem to be more awareness of the origin-story in either BRG or BBG. Research question (ii) is therefore answered in the negative.

Research question (iii) sought to find out the degree of correlation between BRG and BBG. Apart from the contentious issue of the encounter between Yampta and the Bura, even the BRG seems to accept the validity of most details of the origin-story. However, whereas most respondents from both groups readily accept that Babur and Bura are indeed the same language, very few accept that the Babur and the Bura are the same people. This seems to be a social rather than a linguistic problem. In any case, there is still a high degree of correlation between the beliefs of both BRG and BBG: Research question (iii) is therefore answered in the affirmative.

Conclusion

The present paper has drawn attention away from the details of the Babur-Bura origin story to an attitudinal interpretation of the story. The current language habits of the research sample seems to bring together both the Babur and the Bura and show the underlying similarities which seem to suggest oneness. CROZIER and BLENCH (1992:26) are therefore right to have concluded that "... (these are) ... two peoples with one language" - in spite of the suggestions of their oral tradition. Future research should concentrate on detailed phonetic investigation of the speech of both groups, with a view to accommodate the Babur speech form within the Bura orthography (cf. BADEJO, 1987), for example.

References

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Appendix

	Gloss	Babur	Bura
1.	"I'm going"	yà t@rà	yà kwà t@rà
2.	"egg"	thlí thlí	híhí
3.	"you (pl.)"	jìrì	gìrì
4.	"Where are you (pl.)"	jìrì ámárí	gìrì ámárí
5.	"His wife"	màlàntSíää	màlànkíää
6.	"reading"	karatá	karatá
7.	"children"	mádántSàr	mádànkýàr
8.	"mat (made from palm-tree leaf)"	s@rpí	kitSí (made from grass)
9.	"father"	bàbá	bà:bá
10.	"baobab leaf"	thlivà	hivà
11.	"Musa saw Ali"	Musa kù wùtì Ali	Musa wùtì Ali